Paranormal Folklore in Western Georgia: A Critical Narrative Investigation

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Introduction: This project seeks to examine paranormal folklore from a qualitative and critical perspective. Folklore may take the form of stories, myths, or legends circulating in a local community or discourse. Paranormal folklore, it has been suggested (Kripal, 2011), contains a "critical" kernel of truth whereby these forms of discourse push back against more normative accounts of reality and challenge everyday ways of understanding the self and the world. This project builds on the critical nature of folkloric stories by analyzing the way a paranormal encounter or exceptional experiences (ExEs) can develop textually, linguistically, and socially into a more widely accepted 'tall tale' that then takes on a certain aura (Walker, 1995). That is, we are interested in the *power effects* that paranormal folklore have with regard to shaping subjectivity and various frames of reality. What we mean by power effects is the way that those that experience ExEs and the paranormal experiences themselves can be dismissed and deemed unworthy of scholarship or further study. Previous works have cataloged some of the paranormal or, more generally, Fortean events within Georgia without connecting them to folklore per se. For example, Miles (2000) chronicles reports of various phenomena - many of which fall within Heard County or, more generally, within what is called the Troup-Heard Corridor, which encompasses some of our target area and is a hotspot of UFO activity (e.g., the ghost light of Spearman Place, p. 234) and may in part be a function of the high quartz-content of the stones in the area. Purportedly sasquatch-like cryptids such as the "Bung-a-Dingo" (p. 46), the South Georgia Pig Man of the Okefenokee Swamp (p. 48), and the Billy Holler Bugger of Dahlonega (p. 49), as well as the river monster known as Altama-ha by the Tama Native Americans (e.g., p. 67), appear in specific regions within Georgia. Additionally, endeavors such as the Bigfoot Mapping Project (www.bigfootmap.com) provide up-to-date location-specific data on reported sightings of relict hominoids without focusing on folklore of the phenomenon explicitly; however, while database reports of encounters extend across all of the contiguous United States and into Alaska, only several are from the Western Georgia area. Scholar and Georgia resident Joshua Cutchin (2022) offers mythopoetic insight into Georgian lore as well as paranormal hotspots throughout the United States, pointing to a possibility of more narratives emerging from western Georgia that could be tied to liminal spaces in the area. A more robust collection of contemporary paranormal folkloric narratives in western Georgia could add greater texture to extant literature and context to endeavors such as the mapping project. While the initial study, already IRB approved, is examining paranormal folklore in the geographic region of western Georgia in the United States, in the future, we hope to expand the project and examine paranormal folklore more globally.

As a case in point, Hufford (1982) provides a constructive model for how our study might be expanded more globally in the future. The researcher examined the "old hag" phenomenon or what medically might be known as sleep paralysis by using a mixed methods approach to gather data. Our present study differs in that we are not ethnographically interviewing residents of the geographic area in order to deduce the best survey questions to ask, as in the Hufford (1982) study. Rather, we are providing the

respondents a free-response space to thickly describe their paranormal account, thereby encouraging as much detail as possible in the data (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). However, within the confines of the present study, the importance of geographic specificity is central to our hypothesis such that the fringe or even trickster-nature (Hansen, 2001) of the paranormal seems to be covered over and buried by larger meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) that smother what we might call the authentic exceptional experience in its originality. Some examples of these meta-narratives, from a parapsychological perspective, include materialist or physicalist science, the spectacle nature of ExEs (e.g., as depicted in ghost hunting shows), an adjournment to religious ideologies, and others. As a case in point, McClenon (2016) explores the relationship between ExEs and the creation of religious belief and ideology. Moreover, Hess (1989, 1991, 1993) provides an extensive backdrop for contextualizing how the ideological arena impacts paranormal belief using sociological methods - importantly, helping to situate the findings of the completed research project. The function of power has a long tradition in critical theory.

Foucault (2018) believed one of the core critical procedures was to excavate subjugated knowledges. These knowledges are often buried for political reasons. Parapsychology, as a science and in particular, could benefit from such an analysis insofar as it remains excluded from the mainstream scientific community. What's more, the geographic and localized nature of folklore makes this discourse especially pertinent in challenging materialistic paradigms that rendered the paranormal as such. The local specificity, in other words, grounds the discourse in a time and place, which is in stark contradistinction to the natural sciences that work to develop universal theories and truths that are applicable regardless of context, culture, and community. Qualitative research is an underrepresented methodology in parapsychology (Murray & Woffitt, 2010). As a result, this project brings to bear more recent concepts from critical theory, in particular critical narrative analysis (Emerson & Frosh, 2004), in order to better understand what counts as believable and what becomes Other, anomalous, or discarded. In fact, the very notion of what counts as science is, in many cases, presupposed by not only paranormal researchers but the wider, more mainstream scientific community. These presuppositions in parapsychology generally take their lead from a natural scientific approach (Giorgi, 1992) when the study of exceptional experiences should be more in line with a human science methodology. In so doing, we want to analyze the way that our own geographically-local situatedness impacts our findings. Given that the University of West Georgia maintains a unique position within the domains of parapsychology and consciousness studies, including the continual curation of archival collections (Olivieri, 2021) dedicated to figures such as Ingo Swann, William Roll, and other seminal scholars within these disciplines, we are uniquely poised to reflect on our particular placement within these fields and within the larger Western Georgia community through efforts such as the proposed project.

Methods: *Phase 1.*

1. We have created an anonymous survey using Qualtrics. The survey's main purpose is to provide an open space for a long-narrative account of paranormal local folklore. The prompt that we provide the respondent in order to define what constitutes folklore is as follows: "The purpose of this survey is to collect paranormal folklore from Western Georgia. 'Paranormal' could include encounters with cryptids like Bigfoot, experiencing hauntings or seeing apparitions, abduction experiences or seeing unexplainable objects in the sky, encounters with nature entities like fairies or elves, and other similar kinds of

exceptional experiences." The respondent is asked to type in using a textbox a description of their tall tale. The following is what the respondent will see in the survey:

Table 1

Prompts for the respondent to enter their folklore account in the survey.

First-Hand Experience (leave blank if not applicable): Describe in as much detail as possible a paranormal story, myth, or legend that you have personally experienced in Western Georgia using the space provided. Paranormal could include encounters with cryptids like Bigfoot, experiencing hauntings or seeing apparitions, abduction experiences or seeing unexplainable objects in the sky, encounters with nature entities like fairies or elves, and other similar kinds of exceptional experiences. If you would like to submit more than one, use the subsequent questions to do so or skip them accordingly.
Second-Hand Story (leave blank if not applicable): Describe in as much detail as possible a paranormal story, myth, or legend that you have heard about in Western Georgia using the space provided. Paranormal could include encounters with cryptids like Bigfoot, experiencing hauntings or seeing apparitions, abduction experiences or seeing unexplainable objects in the sky, encounters with nature entities like fairies or elves, and other similar kinds of exceptional experiences. If you would like to submit more than one, use the subsequent questions to do so or skip them accordingly.
Story 3, specify as first-hand experience or second-hand story (leave blank if not applicable):
Story 4, specify as first-hand experience or second-hand story (leave blank if not applicable):

The survey will also have a question that has the participant affirm the legend originates in the Western Georgia area. We define Western Georgia as roughly 30 miles in every direction around Carrollton (i.e., generally encompassing Carroll, Haralson, Douglas, Coweta, and Heard Counties in Western Georgia, as well as some of Cleburne and Randolph Counties in eastern Alabama). There will be a space to provide the zip code where the legend is primarily located. Basic demographic information will be obtained including gender, ethnicity, religious identification, and age. However, the anonymous nature of the survey will prevent these identifiers from being tied back to the participant.

2. The survey has been advertised on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, around the University and West Georgia, and around the local communities using the flier created by the research team. All responses are collected virtually. The fliers and other recruitment materials contain links or QR codes that direct participants to the online Qualtrics platform. If a respondent does not type anything in the textbox, their response is blank. There is no option to record audio or submit other forms of media, such as videos. The respondent is encouraged to describe in as much detail the account. We realize that writing can be a laborious process sometimes and is different from oral storytelling. However, we are requesting written accounts. The participants are not compensated for participation.

3. The survey opened in May 2022 and has remained so as this is an ongoing study. So far, we have received 34 reports. These consist of apparitions, cryptids (e.g., purported relict hominoids most

frequently named as bigfoot or abominable snowman in Western media and eyewitness accounts), unidentified aerial phenomena, and psychokinetic phenomena.

4. The collected folklore will be analyzed using the critical narrative methodology (Emerson & Frosh, 2004; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2020). Critical narrative analysis examines the ways that, for example, localized and indigenous accounts challenge meta-narratives about the world. Meta-narratives tend to be Eurocentric models that have the most social traction. We do not seek to collect these ourselves. Rather, based upon the corpus of critical theory, these tend to be the most popular models of reality and include physicalist science, religion, mediatic depictions, and so on. To put it as a research question, what general logic makes these stories paranormal in the first place? By general logic, we mean to denote how do respondents conceive of these events to be paranormal or, put differently, how does ideological power influence the classification of a paranormal event? This paranormal element, we proffer as our hypothesis, creates believable narratives that defy hegemonic accounts regarding the nature of the world and, as a result, posit alternative, locally situated discourses with more historical grounding. We place methodological importance and analysis on understanding believability and classification. That is to say, respondents, prima facie, classify their accounts as paranormal when intending to participate in the survey. How do sociological and cultural influences create this? And furthermore, in what ways do these paranormal folklore "push back" or enact their own social and cultural impacts?

5. The results will be situated within the context of relevant literature. In the future, we propose to use interviews and focus groups in order to supplement data obtained virtually.

6. The Conclusion, Results, and Discussion will be presented at professional conferences and submitted for peer-review publication.

Phase 2.

1. The narratives that are collected will be moved from Qualtrics to a publicly available website and database.

2. A thematic analysis will be conducted on the narratives using NVivo in order to group the accounts according to their most general themes – e.g., apparitions, cryptids, alien encounters, nature spirits, etc.

3. This public database will be searchable and updated as more paranormal narratives are collected.

Discussion: Similar work has been done in collecting folklore and legends of fairies, giants, and other ecological spirits in the Tanat Valley in the United Kingdom (Hunter, 2022). Likewise, research has been conducted to collect and analyze spirits and apparitional legends in Estonia (Valk, 2006). In the United States, arguably, Skinwalker Ranch in Utah is the most widely regarded place for all sorts of strange and paranormal occurrences, including alien sightings, cattle mutilations, non-human apparitions, as well as shapeshifting animals or witches, the ranch's lore tying back to the history of the indigenous Ute tribe who reside in the Uintah Basin wherein lies the ranch (McCue, 2015). Despite decades of research into the site (e.g., under the auspices of Bigelow's National Institute for Discovery Science),

studies of the reported phenomena are still inconclusive and ongoing (Milburn, 2020). Indeed, such hotspots may well serve as exemplars of the kind of high strangeness (Hynek, 1972) of certain extraordinary experiences that Hunter (2021) terms the "deep weird" (p. 5). Other regional hotspots within continental North America include the Pacific Northwest, home to such a large number of reports of Bigfoot that some areas have nicknames reflecting as much (e.g., Vancouver Island, aka "Ape Island"); other cryptids are associated with the region as well (e.g., the *sisiutl* or *wasgo*; Swords, 1991). The Southeast United States has its own share of folkloric accounts, some of which have made their way beyond the particular regions or localities from which they hail: the Skunk Ape of southwestern Florida, for example, is said to look similar to its more popular 'cousin,' from the northwest (i.e., Bigfoot; McClure et al., 2011), but to have a particularly strong and unpleasant odor that sets it apart from other localized accounts. Thus, academic interest in the collection and study of paranormal folklore (and its physical, psychological, and/or cultural corollaries) has enjoyed at least some limited success among Western academic and scientific circles. Yet, despite popular attempts to collate reports of the variety of such phenomena within the state of Georgia as a whole (e.g., Miles, 2000) or even to elucidate specific phenomena within certain regions of Georgia (e.g., Miles, 2017), the local folklore and legends in Western Georgia remain uncanonized without any scholastic analysis. Our study attempts to fill this gap.

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Unusual Experiences of The Survival Type in Brazilian and British Children: Research in Progress

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Summary: Unusual experiences (UEs) or anomalous experiences may be experienced by a substantial amount of the population, but they "usually deviate from ordinary experiences or from the usually accepted explanations of reality" (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2014, p.4). Children's UEs are depicted in cultural productions and are referred to in the history of modern Spiritualism and in classical biographical studies of mediumship. More recent research with adults also points to the onset of UEs in childhood (Delmonte et al., 2016; Roxburgh & Roe, 2014; Wahbeh & Radin, 2018). UEs of the survival type are those that the experiencer interprets in terms of the survival of consciousness after bodily death (Rock, 2014). Mediumship, after-death communications, and poltergeists are some examples.

The beginnings of experimental research on UEs that directly involve children can be traced back to Foster (1943), a white researcher who worked with 50 Plains-Indian children in a government school in Canada. In the 1960s, Louisa Rhine (1961), through a letter collection, studied the precognitive dreams of 216 children. Louwerens (1960) experimented on precognition with 684 children in the Netherlands,

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